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Haig Cautions Hill Against Ending Aid To El Salvador

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Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., speaking against a background of mounting controversy about U.S. policy in Central America, told Congress yesterday that cutting off military aid would be "a fatal blow" to the government of El Salvador in its struggle against leftist guerrillas.

"I think it would be a catastrophe," Haig said. "In practical terms, the guerrillas are not about to overwhelm the country. But American arms are a crucial factor, even more in political and psychological terms than in actual material terms."

The secretary's testimony before a Senate subcommittee came on a day that saw a rapid-fire series of developments continue to push the debate over El Salvador and Nicaragua to the forefront of congressional and executive branch attention. Among events yesterday and last night were these:

- Twenty-six prominent officials of past Republican and Democratic administrations emerged from a classified intelligence briefing at the State Department to say they had been given convincing evidence that the Salvadoran guerrillas are being aided, supplied and guided from outside by Cuba and Nicaragua. However, the former officials also agreed that the evidence is so "sensitive" that it cannot be made public without causing serious damage to U.S. ability to collect intelligence in the future.

- Haig, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and some other senior administration officials refused to comment on a report yesterday in The Washington Post that President Reagan has approved a \$19 million program to destabilize the revolutionary Sandinista-dominated government in Nicaragua. Instead, they took the position, described by Haig as "consistent and longstanding policy," that the government does not comment publicly on covert activities, but they added that their silence should not be interpreted as confirmation of the report.

However, White House counselor Edwin Meese III told a journalism seminar here last night that The Post report placed the administration in a "totally untenable position." Meese said: "Here is a situation in which the security of the country is seriously affected, whether the article be true or false. If it is true, then very important secrets vital to our national interest and vital to the success of any such mission have been revealed. If it is false, then you have given an adversary a great opportunity for propaganda."

- Haig said the administration has not rejected Mexican President Jose Lopez Portillo's offer to act as a mediator in trying to end the Salvadoran civil war and ease the tensions between the United States and Nicaragua. The secretary said he would continue discussing the idea with Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda in New York this weekend; in another hint that Washington wants to keep alive the possibility of eventual negotiations, Haig expressed hope that after the March 28 elections for a constituent assembly in El Salvador, the guerrillas might be induced to lay down their arms and negotiate "in the context of a plebiscite that would express the will of the Salvadoran people."

- Weinberger and Jones, chairman of the House Committee on Armed Forces, reiterated, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, that the administration has no plans or intentions to send troops to El Salvador to support the civilian government there to increase military and economic aid.

The administration, obviously concerned that its policy toward Central America could be derailed by persistent questions about whether the United States is heading for a new Vietnam-type involvement, this week mounted a campaign to swing public opinion behind its approach.

The effort began Tuesday when senior intelligence officials gave reporters a detailed briefing, including the display of blowups of aerial reconnaissance photographs, designed to show that Nicaragua is building a sizable military establishment with Cuban and Soviet help. The second stage came yesterday with the briefing aimed at enlisting the support of former officials and with Haig's appearance before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees foreign aid.

Under heavy questioning from Republican and Democratic members, Haig reiterated his past charges that the Salvadoran guerrillas are "largely controlled" from the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. He said the principal flaw in the Mexican peace initiative, which he asserted is basically the same plan proposed by the United States and rejected by Nicaragua last year, is the lack of a requirement that Nicaragua "commit itself to cease and desist" in its involvement with its neighbors.

"We are exploring every feasible means possible to bring about a peaceful solution," he said. "But this is a two-way street, and it requires reciprocal obligations by those who

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